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# An Unsettling View of Kremlin Tactics

The jigsaw pieces of intelligence from Moscow form a disturbing picture. It looks as if the hardheads in the Kremlin may be taking advantage of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev's illness to tighten the screws.

They are undermining the Middle East peace, subsidizing Cuban military moves in Africa, threatening the oil-tanker routes, cracking down on dissidents at home and carping at President Carter.

Yet the view of the Kremlin that emerges from the intelligence reports and strategic analyses is contradictory. For simultaneously, the aging Soviet leaders are still pushing a strategic-arms agreement, restraining their moves in the Indian Ocean, sharing space flight data and exchanging goodwill missions with the United States.

A clue to Kremlin behavior might be found in the hardening Soviet attitude toward the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. Following Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel last November, Carter made an appeal to Brezhnev to use "moderation" in commenting on the trip. The President reported confidentially to his Cabinet that the message to Brezhnev "apparently" had "some effect."

But not long afterward, Brezhnev was seen coughing into his handkerchief. Then he suddenly cancelled all appointments and disappeared from public. He didn't even celebrate his 71st birthday on Dec. 19.

Soviet officials took pains to assure curious Americans that Brezhnev's illness was nothing serious. Most likely, he was a victim of the flu epidemic that has debilitated an estimated 40 million Russians this winter.

While he has been incapacitated, the Soviet propaganda apparatus has turned sharply against the Egyptian-Israeli dialogue and President Carter's role in the Middle East. Intelligence reports claim that the Kremlin is also supplying more military and economic aid to the Arab states that oppose Sadat's move, such as Iraq, Libya and Syria.

Apparently, the Kremlin is gambling on the eventual collapse of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. This would discredit the peace initiatives, lower Sadat's standing in Arab eyes and reduce U.S. influence in the Arab world. Then the Soviet Union would wind up holding a pass key to the Middle East.

A more imminent threat to the peace in the area has been created by the Soviet military shipments to Ethiopia; these have increased sharply since Brezhnev's incapacitation. Intelligence sources have spotted more than 20 Soviet cargo ships in the Red Sea off the Ethiopian coast. At least 40 Soviet transport flights ferried Cuban soldiers and arms into Ethiopia during the past month.

The worry is that the ubiquitous Cuban troops, armed with Soviet jets, artillery, rockets and radar, will invade neighboring Somalia in the spring. Both Egypt's President Sadat and Saudi Arabia's King Khalid discussed this danger with Carter during his recent world tour. They fear the Kremlin, using the Cubans as mercenaries, will foment a Vietnam-style action in strategic Somalia.

A Communist victory would set up a Soviet satellite on the Gulf of Aden, directly across from South Yemen, which is already under Soviet influence. Then radical, Soviet-supported governments would control the approaches to the Red Sea, which tankers now use to haul Middle East oil to the West. On the opposite side of Africa, the Soviets could use Angola as a base for harassing tankers that tried an end run around the African horn. This means the Soviets would be able to cut off the oil flow from the Middle East in case of war.

On the human-rights issue, Carter has assured the sensitive Soviets that he isn't singling them out to embarrass them but is championing human rights around the world. He has made a personal private appeal to the Soviets to re-

lease the distinguished Jewish dissident Anatoly Shcharansky, who has been held by the KGB secret police for 10 months. Several other U.S. officials have raised the Shcharansky case with their Soviet counterparts.

But again, the Kremlin has taken a tougher attitude since Brezhnev came down with the flu. Only a few days ago, Shcharansky's family was notified to retain a lawyer and prepare for a trial. He is expected to be found guilty of "treason" based on the "confession" of a witness named Sanya Lipavsky. Yet the President has received the personal word of CIA chief Stansfield Turner that Shcharansky has never been connected, directly or indirectly, with the CIA.

Kremlinologists caution, of course, that the moderating influence of Leonid Brezhnev should not be overestimated. All the available evidence indicates that he is still in control of the Kremlin. No major policy decisions are made, it is understood, without his personal approval. The experts point out, for example, that Brezhnev has fully supported the flirtation with the dissident Arab nations, the use of Cuban mercenaries to expand Soviet influence in Africa and the defiance of President Carter on human rights. But intelligence sources are convinced that the Kremlin hardheads have increased their power perceptibly during Brezhnev's absence.

They are not likely, however, to change any basic policies or undermine the détente with the United States. Under Brezhnev's guidance, for example, the strategic-arms talks still appear to be headed toward a new agreement.

Not only has there been satisfactory progress on arms limitation by the two superpowers, but the first moves have been made to curb the medium-range weapons that threaten Western Europe. The President has approved a National Security Council memorandum calling for strategic and tactical initiatives in Europe. These would be coordinated with our European allies apart from the Soviet-American talks. The first soundings received a favorable response from the Kremlin.

Carter has also reported to his Cabinet, according to the confidential minutes, that "the United States is attempting to cooperate with the Soviets on a number of fronts." He indicated that progress is being made on a comprehensive test ban and on military restraint in the Indian Ocean.

But the big question, in view of Brezhnev's advanced age, is whether Kremlin policy will change after his